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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

36th meeting
Strasbourg, 15-18 November 2016

RECOMMENDATION
ON THE CONSERVATION OF NATURAL HABITATS
AND WILDLIFE, SPECIALLY BIRDS, IN
AFFORESTATION OF LOWLAND IN ICELAND

Document
prepared by
the Directorate of Democratic Governance



Convention on the Conservation
of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats

Standing Committee

Recommendation No. 190 (2016) of the Standing Committee, adopted on 18 November 2016, on the conservation of natural habitats and wildlife, specially birds, in afforestation of lowland in Iceland

The Standing Committee of the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, acting under the terms of Article 14 of the Convention,

Having regard to the aims of the Convention to conserve wild flora and fauna and their natural habitats;

Recalling that Article 3 of the Convention provides that each Contracting Party shall take steps to promote national policies for the conservation of the habitats of wild flora, wild fauna and natural habitats, with particular attention to endangered and vulnerable species, especially endemic ones, and endangered habitats;

Recalling its Recommendation No. 96 (2002) on conservation of natural habitats and wildlife, specially birds, in afforestation of lowland in Iceland;

Noting the joint AEWA/Bern Convention mission held in Iceland on 23-27 May 2016 which had six specific objectives agreed by all concerned parties prior to the mission;

Noting that one of the objectives of the joint AEWA/Bern Convention mission was to review the progress made so far by the Government of Iceland in response to Recommendation No. 96 (2002) and to assess its contribution to addressing the points of concern as indicated in that Recommendation;

Referring to the joint AEWA/Bern Convention mission report prepared by Mr Colin A Galbraith and Mr Dave Pritchard and available in document T-PVS/Files (2016) 42;

Noting that although certain progress has been achieved in the implementation of Recommendation No. 96 (2002), substantial parts have not been fully implemented so far;

Noting the conclusion of the joint mission that currently there is a significant opportunity for a rapid and effective implementation of the actions foreseen in Recommendation No. 96 (2002) and acknowledging the proposals made on the way to complete them;

Agreeing that the current Recommendation supersedes and replaces Recommendation No. 96 (2002),

Recommends that the Government of Iceland:

1. Develop a schedule and clear programme of work to implement the recommendations in this report. This should include details (for each one) of the lead person responsible, along with the timetable (with key milestones where applicable), while taking into account the deadlines

recommended in the joint AEWA/Bern Convention mission report, and the means by which progress will be monitored and evidenced. These should be submitted to the respective Standing Committees through the AEWA and Bern Convention Secretariats by 30 April 2017;

2. Finalise and activate as soon as possible the proposed contract between the Environment Ministry and IINH for a project supporting the implementation of AEWA; share details of the contract as soon as possible with the Secretariats of the Agreement and the Convention; consider the scope for involving external facilitation; and include details of an appropriate scheme for monitoring, evaluating and communicating the project's outcomes;

3. Accelerate significantly Iceland's work towards its contribution to the international Emerald Network of sites so this can be completed as soon as possible. Full application of legal protection measures at the national level may need to follow later in some cases, but all other methods should be used to safeguard the nominated sites against the negative impacts of afforestation in the meantime;

4. Implement urgently the provisions in the 2006 legislation for Strategic Environmental Assessment of regional afforestation programmes, and of those Municipal plans that cover areas of importance for waterbirds. Undertake the SEA of national forestry policy as originally recommended under the Bern Convention in 2002;

5. Develop a national indicative forestry strategy in the short term, for full implementation over the longer term, which will:

- (i) have the aim of meeting current afforestation targets while minimising negative effects on species or habitats of conservation importance (including both intact and modified wetlands),
- (ii) use the most recent IINH maps and other data, including waterbird and wetland distribution data and the identified ASCIs, to identify zones of different degrees of presumption for and against planting,
- (iii) be linked to the tiered system of decision-making set out in Iceland's Environmental Impact Assessment legislation, and
- (iv) be guided by the conservation priorities and good practice standards referred to in the present report;

6. As part of the IINH work, support the implementation of AEWA in Iceland (see point 2), develop and launch with effect from 2017 an appropriately-resourced country-wide scheme for long-term monitoring of waterbirds and their habitats, to:

- (i) be capable inter alia of detecting changes caused by forestry, and
- (ii) be used inter alia to help inform judgements about forestry development, by reference to the national and international context relating for example to bird distribution, habitat use and the status and trends of populations;

7. Continue to give priority to the screening of afforestation proposals to determine the need for Environmental Impact Assessment according to case-specific judgements concerning the risk of effects on significant ecological values, rather than according to an arbitrary size threshold. Support these decisions with guidelines on factors likely to contribute to such effects (including those that may contribute indirectly, cumulatively and synergistically), and take a precautionary approach where there is uncertainty. Undertake "Class A" assessments under the EIA legislation wherever the circumstances warrant it;

8. Make full use of the opportunity provided by the negotiation of individual planting agreements with landowners to provide advice and attach appropriate conditions to any grant aid, in order to safeguard (and where applicable enhance) important ecological values. Develop effective collaboration between IINH and the Forestry Service, to provide an evidence based approach to support locational guidance for forest planting in future; and to build up relevant knowledge and capacities across government;

9. Undertake a review of existing formalised systems for liaison, consultation and equitable input to decision-making in planning and management of forestry across the various departments and agencies responsible for forestry, planning, environmental protection and climate change policy; and define specific steps for improving coordination and the coherence of action. Address explicitly as part of this review the supportive role of NGOs, academic experts and civil society;
10. Update Iceland's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, incorporating provisions relating to forestry policy and migratory waterbirds that reflect the recommendations made in the joint AEW/Bern Convention mission report, and setting out a timeline for the future implementation of actions, accompanied by the necessary resourcing commitments;
11. Give priority in future environmental research projects and programmes to gathering better Iceland-specific evidence on the ecological mechanisms by which afforestation may impact upon birds and other biodiversity. This should give particular attention to effects that may be secondary, cumulative, synergistic, indirect or "edge"-related, as well as any complicating factors associated with climate change. Make the findings available to all concerned, and use the resulting knowledge fully in EIA screening processes, good practice guidance and advice on e.g. buffer distances, mitigation measures and options for habitat restoration;
12. Update and expand existing guidance on good environmental practice in afforestation, to include (for example):
 - (i) the Bern Convention's draft Code of Conduct on plantation forestry and invasive alien trees, when adopted,
 - (ii) more advice (especially to help municipalities) on EIA and planning decisions,
 - (iii) updated information on the location of sensitive habitats and important sites,
 - (iv) avoidance of sites that support important bird populations (irrespective of habitat quality), and
 - (v) setting back plantation boundaries to provide buffer zones for reducing "edge effects" on wetlands;
13. Given the need, as part of wider ecosystem management, to maintain and restore wetland values and services, as articulated in the Terms of Reference for the Mission; then explore the scope and possibilities for introducing State-funded "positive" financial incentives for land management in favour of nature conservation. This should be informed by research on trends in uptake of existing forms of support and on landowner perspectives concerning the future;
14. Keep the Standing Committee regularly informed about the progress in the implementation of this Recommendation.